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South Korea: Politics in Ferment

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Summary

Although US-South Korean trade issues rank high among the concerns of Seoul's economic decision makers, President Chun Doo Hwan and his advisers are largely preoccupied with the domestic challenges they expect to face between now and early 1988, when Chun has promised to step down. The ruling camp hopes to orchestrate a peaceful transition that will preserve its hold on power on terms that most South Koreans, as well as Seoul's key allies, will view as legitimate. For its part, the political opposition, led by career politicians who want an end to military-dominated government, has escalated demands for political reform, including amendment of the current presidential election system.

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Constitutional Reform

The main opposition New Korea Democratic Party (NKDP) took its campaign for political reform to the streets in February,

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when it launched a petition drive for direct election of Chun's successor:

- The collapse of the Marcos regime galvanized the South Korean opposition leaders, who cited parallels between South Korea and the Philippines and warned that Chun might also be removed by "people power."
- Opposition-sponsored rallies supporting the petition drive have drawn larger than expected audiences, and opinion shapers, including chief Catholic prelate Cardinal Kim, Protestant leaders, and more than 500 university professors, have issued statements supporting democratization.
- Several other antigovernment campaigns have also sprung up, including a press- and church-supported boycott against user fees that support the government's heavily censored TV network.

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The government has responded to the growing challenge with uncharacteristic adroitness, increasing pressure on the opposition to bring the constitutional reform issue back into the National Assembly--where the ruling party has control:

- On 30 April Chun said he would accept a bipartisan agreement to revise the constitution during his term, which he had vigorously opposed earlier, and he has appointed a special committee of jurists to consider the issue.
- The President has also held unprecedented private meetings with the two main opposition party presidents.

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Opposition on the Defensive

The opposition, caught off guard by Chun's conciliatory gesture, came under fire from normally antigovernment journalists and other observers when it failed to respond flexibly to Chun's offer and appeared hesitant to disavow the violent tactics and anti-US rhetoric of the radical fringe:

- The opposition rally in Inchon on 3 May, which resulted in large-scale violence by youthful radicals, deepened the NKDP's dilemma, according to the US Embassy, over how to proceed tactically. NKDP leaders remain sensitive to the public backlash following the Inchon riots but are concerned about alienating radical students and workers who have served as useful allies in the past.

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- The government, meanwhile, has skillfully marketed the Inchon incident in an effort to discredit the opposition and to justify increased arrests of radical students, as well as Christian and labor dissidents. Currently more than 1,500 political violators are serving sentences or are in jail pending trial. []

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Shaken by public criticism and anxious to rebuild its image, the opposition has agreed in principle to establish a committee on constitutional reform during the current 20-day special National Assembly session that continues until 24 June:

- President Chun is urging quick agreement on a draft amendment followed by legislative approval later this year.
- The ruling party favors a parliamentary cabinet system.
- Opposition moderates welcome the opportunity to debate the constitutional question, and some appear willing to accept the government's preferred solution.
- Other opposition elements, however, particularly those in the faction of leading dissident Kim Dae Jung, remain adamant about direct presidential elections and insist on amnesty for jailed dissidents as a precondition to forming the special committee. []

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It remains to be seen if President Chun can successfully balance apparent flexibility toward the political opposition with stiff measures aimed at neutralizing radical elements:

- Chun will probably consider Washington's reaction in fashioning his tactics. US criticism of a harsh crackdown could cause problems with Army leaders, who might read it as weakening the overall relationship, including US security guarantees. On the other hand, Chun probably sees a need to project a strong image in order to discourage challenges to his authority by military leaders and members of his own party, particularly if the ruling camp's grip on the succession issue appears to be slipping.
- Chun may feel compelled to move aggressively if the tenuous dialogue on constitutional reform collapses and the opposition resumes its extraparliamentary campaign. Such an impulse would be particularly strong if opposition activities threaten to mar the Asian Games this fall or to play into the hands of North Korean efforts to cast a pall over the 1988 Seoul Olympics. []

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Outlook

With the constitutional reform question the focus of the National Assembly and controlling radicals a major goal in the streets, neither the opposition nor ruling parties is likely to take up unpopular trade-related issues:

- Although most South Koreans abhor the recent upsurge of virulent anti-Americanism among radical elements, there is nonetheless widespread resentment of what is perceived as premature US pressure to open the market.
- Constructive bipartisan dialogue on the constitutional reform issue during the special session, however, could give both the government and opposition greater latitude to deal with pending trade legislation, including intellectual property protection, when the regular legislative session opens in late September.  25X1

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